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# Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics

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**Abstract** *In an era increasingly defined by insecurity and populist politics, India has emerged as a forceful ontological security provider under the leadership of Narendra Modi. If ontological security is about finding a safe (imagined) haven, then ontological insecurity is about the lack of such a space in narrative terms. Drawing on Lacanian understandings of ‘the imaginary’ as something that can fill and naturalize this lack of space, the article is concerned with how memories, places and symbols of narrative identity constructions are used in populist discourse. More specifically, it attempts to understand the relationship between ontological insecurity and the imaginaries of populist politics in India. In so doing, it argues that the re-invention of ‘nationhood’, ‘religion’ and ‘Hindu masculinity’ along gendered lines has created a foundation for governing practices aimed at ‘healing’ a number of ontological insecurities manifest in Indian society. It specifically looks at how the Modi doctrine has formulated and expanded its foreign policy discourse into one that privileges populist narratives of nativism, nationalism and religion as forms of ontological security provision at home and abroad, but also how everyday practices can challenge such narratives, thus allowing different imaginaries of the Indian state.*

## Introduction

This article focuses on the relationship between ontological insecurity and the imaginaries of populist politics in India. It proceeds from a critical analysis of populist narratives of ‘nationhood’ and ‘religion’ as discernible in Indian foreign policy discourses and as related to modernity and the prevention of terrorism. It discusses how such narratives become imaginary objects, tied up with nationalist and religious doctrines in the hands of populist political leaders, such as Narendra Modi, the current Indian prime minister. I argue that the re-invention of ‘nationhood’ and ‘religion’ along gendered lines has created a foundation for governing practices in which hegemonic interpretations of religion and secularism turn into normalizing narratives aimed at ‘healing’ a number of ontological insecurities manifest in Indian society. Hence, the article focuses on the re-thinking, re-justification and re-imagination of the Indian state and Indian foreign policy through Hindu nationalism and how gendered

narratives of 'nationhood' and 'religion' can explain the desires and ruptures involved in ontological security seeking at home and abroad, but also on how such narratives can be challenged through everyday practices, thus allowing for different imaginations of the Indian state.

The article begins with a discussion of the relationship between populism and ontological insecurity to argue that the Indian case constitutes a prime example of a psychological and narrative development that is manifest around the world. This involves a re-reading of some of the main propositions in the ontological (in)security literature that concern solutions, or cures, to increased uncertainties, fears and anxieties, where I argue that these have become manifest in imaginary desires for closure and fulfilment. I then proceed to discuss the latest advances in Indian foreign policy discourse with a particular emphasis on how the Modi doctrine has formulated and expanded its foreign policy discourse into one that privileges populist narratives of nativism, nationalism and religion. From there I turn to the gendered nature of such discourse as it accentuates certain populist narratives about nationhood and religious resurgence, expressed in nativist and majoritarian terms, giving preference to an anxious Hindu nationalism aiming to unite Hindus in India and in the diaspora. Finally, I make some preliminary suggestions about how such populist gendered narratives are always ruptured and incomplete and how they therefore may give rise to social resistance and psychological resilience in relation to the Modi regime.

### **Populism and ontological insecurity**

There are few concepts that have been as contested as that of populism. While some have described it as an ideology or a movement (Mudde 2007), others have viewed it as a particular style or 'repertoire' of politics (Wodak 2015). Normatively, especially in studies that are marked by the shadow of the Latin American experience, it is considered as an emancipatory force, a remedy to cure the ills associated with anti-imperialism and late twentieth-century neoliberalism (Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 2001); or it is regarded as a binary doctrine that rests on the distinction between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', where politics should be an expression of the 'general will' of 'the people' (Kriesi and Takis 2015; Mudde 2007). Those following Laclau tend to present populism as an important element of a radical democratic programme, whereas those who have a negative view of populism point to its divisive potential, its inclination to turn a blind eye to the rights of those who are not considered to be part of 'the people', in particular, minorities (ethnic, religious, sexual or otherwise) and of course immigrants (Rydgren 2012). By dividing society into two antagonistic camps, populist discourses ultimately construct 'a people' as 'something less than the totality of the members of the community', while at the same time aspiring 'to be conceived as the only legitimate totality' (Laclau 2005, 81). Ignazi (2003) outlines five features that appear to correspond with current populist politics in India, as well as in many other places: nationalism and nativism, racism, xenophobia, new forms of democratic governance, and appeals for a strong state—and leader. These features and appeals become particularly relevant at times of perceived crisis, expressed in feelings of anxiety and insecurity, be they economic, social, political or psychological. To take an ontological security perspective on populism,

emotions and (in)security means exploring both the structural and the affective reasons behind such anxieties and fears, while also taking into account the emotional responses to these feelings.

To pin down the unknown at times of personal or societal crisis was at the heart of RD Laing's analysis of the inhumanity of late modern society in which he saw a range of threats to ontological society from the coldness of alienated social relations that commodify and depersonalize individuals. In *Self and Others* (1960), he argued that ontological security prevails when there is an absence of 'anxieties and dangers' and when 'identity and autonomy' are not in question (Laing 1960, 39, 41). Ontological insecurity, Laing claimed, arises 'with the consequent attempts to deal with ... anxieties and dangers' where 'identity and autonomy are always in question' (Laing 1960, 39, 42).

Giddens brings the concepts of ontological security and existential anxiety to bear on understandings of modernity and globalization more generally as he moves ontological security to the societal level and is careful to take into account a more structural understanding of the concept. To Giddens, ontological security is about having a 'sense of place' as the world is changing, a 'place' that provides 'a psychological tie between the biography of the individual and the locales that are the settings of the time-space paths through which that individual moves' (Giddens 1984, 367, quoted in Ejduš 2018, 3). Here, he distinguishes between routine situations and critical ones, where the former constitutes the core of ontological security, while the latter involves those instances when the certitudes of institutional routines are threatened or destroyed (Giddens 1991, 61). This has led a number of ontological security scholars in the field of international relations (IR) to emphasize ontological rather than physical security and to talk about the subjective 'need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time' (Mitzen 2006, 342), where the suppression of fears of uncertainty occurs through routines (Mitzen 2006) or through the construction of biographical narratives (Berenskoetter 2014; Steele 2005; 2008). Here securitization has been viewed as a key political process in the containment of anxiety and the production of ontological security (Rumelili 2015), leading to an emphasis on the 'securitization of subjectivity', which refers to 'attempts made to intensify the search for one stable identity in order to reduce ontological insecurity and existential anxiety' (Kinnvall 2006, 50).<sup>1</sup>

If ontological security is about finding a safe (imagined) haven, then ontological insecurity is about the lack of such a space in narrative terms. This lack, to speak with Lacan (2000),<sup>2</sup> is filled with desires for wholeness, thus implying that the 'security of being' that Giddens talks about always is and

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<sup>1</sup> The extent to which the study of ontological security opens up or closes down the question of the subject is currently much debated, with some scholars arguing that most ontological security literature still proceeds from the idea of a secure subject with a stable sense of identity (see, for example, Browning and Joenniemi 2013; Eberle 2019; Rossdale 2015). Against this criticism can be noted how a number of ontological security scholars have long insisted that the need for a stable identity is always something perceived or imagined (see, for example, Croft 2012; Kinnvall 2017; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Lacan refers to this 'lack' as creating ontological anxiety. As such, it has its origin in the split between the inner world of the infant and the symbolic order that pre-exists it. It is the inability to re-experience the moment of birth, resulting in a constant lack (a lack of certainty, stable identity and a full sense of self) that can only be (temporarily) healed through imaginings of wholeness and autonomy. For detailed discussions of a Lacanian perspective on populism, see Kinnvall (2018); on misrecognition: Kinnvall and Svensson (2018).

has to be an imaginary space. As Eberle (2019, 8) has argued: ‘the incorporation of fantasy [into the ontological security literature] thus offers a better appreciation of the role of desire in the search for ontological security, as well as a way of operationalising desire via the “object” of a fantasy’. This ‘object’ is often naturalized through biographical narratives, memories, places and symbols of narrative identity constructions (see Ejodus 2018). Central to such narrative constitutions and consolidations of (collective) identity are collective emotions such as love for the nation or hate, fear or disgust for the stranger other. These become, in Lacanian terms, the objects of our imaginations on to which fantasies of unity are projected in order to rescue the belief in core identities. Such (imaginary) core identities are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the master signifiers of national and religious identity (Kinnvall 2006), especially in a context of collective anxiety and threats to perceived core values bound up with these signifiers, as has been the case in India.

Here, the preoccupation with national identity is particularly relevant in the context of populist politics as political leaders direct their emotional messages and appeals to an apprehensive and ontologically insecure electorate, engaging in what Richards (2013) has termed ‘emotional governance’. Complex developments, such as migration or multiculturalism, are often simplified into a process of naming the culprits—those guilty of destroying the ‘pure nation’ (Pelinka 2013). In India, this is exemplified by the debate around religion and secularism in regard to majority–minority relations and prevailing anxieties of the Hindu majority. The Indian case also clarifies how populists are never entirely divorced from their specific cultural and national contexts but are equally (and often unconsciously) tied up with the master signifiers of imagined objects, such as the nation or religion. Hence, in addition to finding culprits and constructing others on to which fear and anxiety can be projected, populists typically adopt a rhetoric and governing style that challenge the authority, neutrality and expertise of traditional establishment elites (Wodak 2015). Both anti-establishment sentiments and the search for culprits have at their core an ideology of ‘nativism’, which argues that ‘states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the nation-state’ (Mudde 2007, 22). Nativism involves an important economic feature of welfare chauvinism, which distinguishes the ‘pure’ people and their birthright to the nation-state’s welfare structure from undeserving others, notably minorities and immigrants (Derks 2006; Wodak 2015, see also Kinnvall 2018).

Nativism in populist discourse is intimately connected to gender, and a number of feminist writers have analysed the role of gender in the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation and its ‘essence’ (Kinnvall 2017; Butler 2004; Yuval-Davis 1997), as well as the role of gender in nationalist ideology (Norocel 2013). Here it is often a matter of demarcating ‘the nation’s’ women from other, ‘alien’, women, as well as a preoccupation with saving these (‘national’) women from ‘alien’ men.<sup>3</sup> In such contexts, nativism tends to become intertwined with a ‘gender discourse based on the regulation of

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<sup>3</sup> See the parallels in Spivak’s (1999) discussion of the subaltern and her ability to speak.

sexuality and reproduction within the nation, the protection of “our” women and the inferiorisation/demonization of the “Others”’ gender culture’ (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014, 46). Hindu nationalist descriptions of Muslim men in India as being ‘hyper-sexualized’ and ‘hyper-masculine’ threats to Hindu women is a powerful illustration of such discourses.

Nativist and anti-establishment narratives also tend to rely on the trope of the ‘betrayed people’, in which the benefits of the welfare state have been ‘sold out’ or stripped off by embedded elites in the name of multiculturalism (Inglehart 2016). The supporters of such narratives often seek salvation in charismatic leaders who maintain direct links with them through public rallies and conventional and social media, allegedly articulating the so-called ‘authentic’ voice of ordinary people (Inglehart 2016). Here the internet is increasingly used to mobilize and coordinate joint action and voices at the same time as it provides opportunities for inducing and maintaining ‘collective identities’ and a sense of ‘community’ (Caiani and Parenti 2009). In this regard it is interesting to note how Indian Prime Minister Modi has more than 37.8 million followers on Twitter, the second-highest number of followers for any politician worldwide, after United States (US) President Donald Trump (Welle 2017).

Much psychological research on populism is concerned with the attitudes of disaffected individuals in terms of voting behavior, explaining the electoral success of populist parties in terms of political cynicism (Bergh 2004; Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013) and anti-establishment attitudes (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007), identified along with ideological proximity and low social and economic status (Arzheimer and Carter 2006). Central in social psychological research has been group identification and belongingness (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008). Along these lines, social exclusion has been viewed as a recurring explanation for populist attitudes, and researchers in social psychology have argued that human beings constantly need to seek out and bond with other people and groups (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Research also shows that perceived threats to one’s social group can also trigger feelings of anger, alienation or disenfranchisement (Belmi and Laurin 2016). Existing research thus provides psychological insights for understanding why individuals turn to populist politics as a way to cope with and seek to accomplish attachment and belongingness, often by avoiding rejection and isolation (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008). This may also increase conformity to a new and inclusive group’s social norms, since it provides an opportunity to fortify a threatened source of belongingness.

Compared with much work in social psychology, research on ontological insecurity takes seriously both the structural and the psychological aspects of populist politics and adds to the literature on belongingness and rejection by looking at the *perceived* and/or *imagined* threats and anxieties individuals and groups experience against what they see as ‘their’ culture, religion, tradition and, more generally, ‘their’ nation. These are often related to a multitude of fears and disaffections and cannot be divorced from more sociological research on populism. Pels (2012) outlines a number of such fears in relation to socio-political challenges at times of crisis: fear of losing one’s job; fear of strangers (migrants/minorities); fear of losing national autonomy; fear of losing old traditions and values; fear of climate change; disappointment and even disgust

with mainstream politics and corruption; anger about the growing gap between rich and poor; dissatisfaction with the lack of transparency of national and international decision-making processes; etc. Many of these fears come together in prevailing anxieties and cultural traumas, and they almost always have a gendered dimension. Here the attachment to a legitimating ideology (religious and/or national), and the myths and symbols ascribed to such ideologies (cultural memorization), can provide a sense of belonging, rewarding personal and social ties, and increase status and self-esteem (Silke 2008). Such cultural memorization can, in ontological security terms, securitize subjectivity by specifying the indeterminate nature of ontological security as a need that actors believe they have in order for them to experience a notion of (fictional) wholeness and mastery of self. But it can also offer a sense of risk, adventure, excitement and danger, as well as fulfilling a desire for vengeance, thereby contributing to specific masculine attachments (and a masculinization of politics [see Scrinzi 2017]) that provide bonds and comradeship, and an emotional pull to act in the face of injustice (Silke 2008).

Hence, in addition to socio-psychological understandings of populism, context-specific factors, such as, socio-political traditions, party-political histories, cultural hegemonic tendencies, the media landscape and foreign policy, must be taken into account together with socio-economic development and the transnational effects of globalization. What remains constant across the board of populist appeal, however, especially after the September 11 attacks and consequent events, is the 'fear of strangers related to vehement nativist nationalism built on the myth of the quasi-homogenous nation-state', increasingly expressed in terms of Islamophobia (Özkirimli 2017; Wodak 2015, 31–32). As a result, we should focus on both structural and psychological anxieties, or ontological insecurities, to produce a more comprehensive framework for understanding the appeal of populist politics and the qualities specific to individual and collective involvement. In the case of India, this raises questions around state-making at home and abroad and how such state constructions are tied to populist, often gendered, narratives of the nation and religious resurgence.

### **Populism and Indian foreign policy discourse**

India does not need to become anything else. India must become only India. This is a country that once upon a time was called 'the golden bird'. We have fallen from where we were before. But now we have the chance to rise again. If you see the details of the last five or ten centuries, you will see that India and China have grown at similar paces. Their contributions to global GDP [gross domestic product] have risen in parallel, and fallen in parallel. Today's era once again belongs to Asia. India and China are both growing rapidly, together. That is why India needs to remain India. (Interview with Narendra Modi, CNN, 21 September 2014)

In winning the election in 2014, a government dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into power in India. Propped up by its intimate relations with the wider Hindu nationalist movement, BJP succeeded in gaining a clear majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, raising concerns that India was turning into a majoritarian rather than a liberal democracy. Not only is Modi a lifelong

member of the RSS,<sup>4</sup> which has the idea of a pure Hindu nation at its core, but the entire election campaign was run in close cooperation with the Sangh Parivar<sup>5</sup> and corporations invested in the symbolic and material accord that would bring Modi into power—often referred to as the ‘Modi Wave’ (Kaul 2017). Winning the election has not only impacted on domestic politics but has spilled over to foreign policy and the distinction between the two, in India and elsewhere, is becoming increasingly difficult to fathom. Given that one of the main tasks of the new Modi-ruled government has been to enhance and change the image of India at home and abroad, where a positive image for India’s foreign policy-makers has become a key ingredient in attempts to make India an important player on the global stage, the interplay between domestic and foreign policy is becoming progressively blurred. This is also an image that is closely associated with populist politics in which Hindu national identity is intensified as a collective response to the ontological insecurities experienced by the Indian leadership as well as the Indian (or Hindu) public at large.

The emergence of Hindu nationalism in relation to an increasingly insecure Hindu electorate did not emerge with the election of Modi, however, but can be traced back to the political mobilization of Hindutva<sup>6</sup> as manifest in the works of Savarkar (1923) and Golwalkar (1939). Golwalkar, in his book *We, or our nationhood defined*, was inspired by Nazi Germany and its emphasis on birth and race to argue that ‘the essence of a people lies in its civilization (Kultur)’ (quoted in Jaffrelot 1996, 53). Here the Muslim minority posed the most severe threat by being a ‘foreign body’ lodged in the Hindu society, thus undermining the Hindu nation (Jaffrelot 1996, 55). However, despite its deep roots in Indian society, Hindu nationalism did not become a political force until the early 1990s, when Hindu nationalists were able to mobilize more than 300,000 Hindus to engage in religious activities, as they did in Ayodhya in 1992 when the Babri Mosque was demolished in favor of an imaginary Hindu (Ram) temple intended to take its place. This coincided with India slowly proceeding towards a market economy after having experienced an economic crisis in May 1991, when the government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for assistance, which provided an opportunity to liberalize the state’s hold upon the economy. This liberalization of the economy has not been without social costs and many provincial cities have experienced a more chauvinistic nationalism and intensified caste-based politics as a result of the struggle over resources and power. An emergent middle class has also made apparent the great cleavages between the middle classes and the downtrodden, and the middle classes have been caught between an inclination towards a Western lifestyle and the pull towards religious beliefs in response to emerging political, economic and

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<sup>4</sup> Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Association of National Volunteers), a Hindu nationalist organization established in 1925.

<sup>5</sup> The family of organizations created by the RSS is often referred to as the Sangh Parivar or just Sangh (organization) or the Parivar (family). These include the VHP, Bajrang Dal, Rashtra Sevika Samiti, Durga Vahini, Swadeshi Jagaran March and others. See Jaffrelot (2005).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Hindutva’ refers to the politicized use of Hindu religion to transform the Indian state into a Hindu nation and is derived from the two terms ‘Hindu’ and *tattva*, so it literally translates as ‘Hindu Principles’; it is the term used for the ideology of the Hindu nationalist movement (see Jaffrelot 1996; Khan et al 2017).



social insecurities.<sup>7</sup> What this brief overview shows is how ontological insecurities have gradually come to dominate the Indian political landscape in relation to global forces and liberalizing policies. However, it is under Modi and the BJP that these insecurities have increasingly been directed towards the preservation of an imagined past in which imaginary objects of threat to the Hindu nation and religion can be discerned.

Here it is important to note how Modi has declared a turn towards a more proactive foreign policy as part of what has been labelled ‘the Modi doctrine’. Included are a number of policies described as: India first; neighbourhood first; overcoming historic hesitations; from Rule-taker to Rule-maker: Indian diaspora; and strengthening cultural ties (Chaturvedi 2017). Of particular significance in terms of the interplay between domestic and foreign policy is the use of a soft power approach that highlights the country’s culture and heritage—the International Day of Yoga, or the ‘Made in India’ enterprise, for example—as well as the mobilization of the Hindu diaspora through an emphasis on cultural ties as well as material and emotional investment in the homeland (Parameswaran 2015). The adoption of the International Day of Yoga by the United Nations (UN) in December 2014 was, for instance, described by Modi as a step towards achieving world peace and countering climate change—a gift to humankind:

Yoga is an invaluable gift of our ancient tradition. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change. (Modi 2014)

This emphasis on culture and heritage has come to more clearly define Hindu nationalism as Indian nationalism. The narrative of India as ‘rising’ and as the ‘world’s largest democracy’ must be seen in this light—a narrative shaped both by notions of India’s exceptional place among ‘great powers’ (Mehta 2009, 224–225) and of celebrating a grand civilization with deep historical roots (Chacko 2014, 329). References to ‘India’s responsibility and innate peacefulness’ (Chacko 2014, 339–340), as opposed to an aggressive Pakistan, depend upon ideas of a uniform (Hindu) nationalist identity. However, it is an identity that is constantly being impeded by sub-national and ethnic attempts to challenge the idea of a strong, integral and totalizing nation-state (Kinnvall and Svensson 2018). This search for recognition always entails an imagined homogenization and a misrecognition of something that can never be recognized, as any attempt towards recognition will only reinforce hegemonic readings of national identity in which ontological security becomes a narcissistic and self-affirming account of a crisis—in this case of an imagined coherent Hindu body that will heal the insecurities of the present.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, a main proposition behind India’s foreign policy choices is that Hinduism is coterminous with the territory of India and that both inside and outside threats to the integrity of the Hindu nation are an offence against the Hindu body. Despite Modi’s declared intent to address economic obstacles to

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<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth account of the relationship between liberalization, globalization and ontological security in India, see Kinnvall (2006).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of a Lacanian approach to misrecognition, see Kinnvall and Svensson (2018).

growth, he has made several important populist gestures to the ideologically charged members of his community and has largely given a free reign to sectarian-driven members of the party and parliament. Examples are plentiful and range from a junior minister in Modi's government, Sadhvi Niranyan Jyoti, publicly calling for Indians to 'decide whether you want a government of those born of Ram, or those born illegitimately' (Barry 2014), to a Modi-appointed historian of mixed reputation, Yellapragada Sudershan Rao, who holds that the two Hindu religious epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, should be viewed as accurate accounts of Indian history, to the more general RSS-sponsored movement, the *ghar wapsi* (meaning 'return home'), that is set on converting members of other faiths to Hinduism (Ganguly 2015). Here the idea of Hinduism as 'home' is connected to ontological-security-seeking paternalistic (and colonial) practices of saving 'gullible tribal people' from being led astray by 'deceptive tactics across the country' (*The Hindu*, 28 December 2017).<sup>9</sup> Nationalist historians have often bought into these populist narratives by seeking to eliminate any critical examination of the epics from university syllabus, with some success (Vijetha 2012).

To this should be added the many self-professed Hindu vigilant 'cow-protectors' who have specifically targeted Muslim minorities and those employed in the cattle industry. Despite these attacks growing in numbers, several states having banned the slaughter of cows,<sup>10</sup> it is only recently that Modi has condemned the attacks (*The Guardian* 2017). These are not isolated incidents as some may argue, but part of a populist strategy, indeed the Modi doctrine itself, which has at its core the political project of Hindutva, expressed in terms of Hindu supremacy at home and abroad. As Ganguly (2015) has argued: 'India's success on the global stage is dependent on the forging of a monolithic nation.'

After winning the election, the Indian Prime Minister has thus spent the last few years set on obtaining support from Indian diaspora communities around the world. Speaking at public places worldwide, such as New York's Madison Square Garden, the Allphones Arena in Sydney and the Wembley Stadium in Britain, he has consistently appealed to the diaspora community to contribute money, time and technical expertise to his signature programmes. In order to boost the tourism industry, he has also called upon Indians abroad to visit India every year (Lakshmi 2015). 'We are changing the contours of diplomacy and looking at new ways of strengthening India's interests abroad,' said Ram Madhav, General Secretary of the BJP; and members of the Indian diaspora 'can be India's voice even while being loyal citizens in those countries. That is the long-term goal behind the diaspora diplomacy' (Fraser 2015; see also Kinnvall and Svensson 2018).

The success of the Hindu nationalist and populist foreign policy strategy was particularly evident in the American Hindu diaspora's support for Donald Trump in the 2016 US election campaign.<sup>11</sup> In interviews, most Indian Trump

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<sup>9</sup> Both Steele and Browning (this special issue) discuss the relationship between home, nationhood and ontological (in)security in explicit detail.

<sup>10</sup> In Gujarat for, example, the crime can lead to a sentence of life imprisonment (Mogul 2017).

<sup>11</sup> For a more extended discussion of Trump and populism, see Homolar and Scholz (this special issue).

voters argued that they saw it as their patriotic duty to India. The argument was that India and America faced the same threat of terrorism from Islamic fundamentalism and that ‘Trump will take terrorists head on’ (George 2016), as one Indian American doctor explained. Not only did the terrorist narrative appeal to Hindu Trump voters, but the rhetoric against illegal Bangladeshi immigration in India was strikingly similar to right-wing American populist discourse about illegal Mexican immigrants—claiming that they posed a threat to the economy and the very identity of the US. The focus on secure borders thus resonated with Hindu narratives of religious resurgence in terms of radicalized migrants from Muslim-majority states violating the Hindu body. Modi’s ‘Made in India’ approach (encourage foreign direct investment [FDI], eliminate tax regulations and bureaucratic red tape to create more business-friendly sectors) also came close to Trump’s call to make America great again, and Modi’s self-declared humble origins—being the son of a chai-wallah (tea seller)—seemed to speak to the everyday Hindu abroad as being straight, honest and anti-establishment.

Here Modi shares with many other populist leaders the ability to unite narratives of nativism with those of religious discourse. He shares with other populists the knowledge that sentiments, images and symbols, rather than rational argument or accurate history, can galvanize individuals by offering his followers what Mishra (2017) has referred to as ‘a fantastical vision of making India great again’. In populist discourse, religion and nationalism combine to provide answers to questions concerning existence itself, the external world and human life, the existence of others, and what self-identity actually is (or is believed to be) (see Giddens 1991; Kinnvall 2004). Religion, and in particular religious resurgence, thus provides a foundation for the creation of intolerance against those who do not share in these beliefs. ‘Othering’ becomes, in other words, a fundamental part of the closing of religious and nationalist boundaries and a foundation for much populist discourse. As Jurgensmeyer (2000, 383–384) has noted, religious resurgence can provide a meta-morality that can disregard regular moral restrictions on the dehumanizing of others and even killing, thus offering a basis for a new national consciousness and even a new political leadership at times of rapid change.

However, there are more similarities that Modi shares with populist leaders elsewhere. Modi’s aversion to the press and his direct communication with the masses through Twitter and *Mann Ki Baat* (literally ‘Heart Talk’—an Indian radio programme hosted by Modi), together with his preference for leaders such as Yogi Adityanath (the current Hindu nationalist chief minister of Uttar Pradesh), known for his support for vigilant militant activities, are in line with a culturally oriented far right populism (Varshney 2017). At heart is the belief that the majority community owns the nation, minority communities being dependents and supplicants rather than carriers of rights. The power of ‘traditional community’ as expressed in populist discourse hence lies in its ability to provide a unified story in terms of Chosen Traumas or Chosen Glories—the nation how it used to be as defined in absolute religious terms and ‘verified’ through religious and historical textbooks (Kinnvall 2006). Looking at the way secularism is defined by populist Hindutva forces, the BJP, interestingly enough, does not reject secularism but adds the qualification of ‘pseudo’ to its usage by those who have historically controlled the political institutions of the Indian state (read Congress), accusing them of corrupting Indian nationalism.

Instead true secularism lies in being fair to the Hindu majority, a democratic necessity as Hindutva sees it. The BJP, the RSS, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Sangh Parivar, in general, thus see secularism as ‘pseudo’ because it is believed to pamper to the minorities (read Muslims) through appeasement policies. It is (as argued by Hindutva forces) ‘inattentive to the internal enemies of nationalism, neglects the sentiments of the majority (read Hindus), and stifles memories of the Hindu view of good life’ (Alam 1999, 200). Here it is important to point out how religious nationalism in India has come to be part of a larger process of populist culturally oriented politics as the world has become smaller and as more people find themselves unable to affect their immediate structural environment. This has given rise to movements, represented in India by Hindutva, that rely on imaginations of the ‘pure’ *people* and their birthright to the nation-state’s infrastructure from those undeserving others.

Under Modi, modernization, development and neoliberal policies have been combined in an appeal to populist cultural politics, wielding together the concerns of both nationalist and neoliberal constituencies of voters. However, as noted by Mehta (2017) in relation to the 2017 election in the Indian state of Gujarat, ‘the more his power has grown, the more his speeches exude insecurity’. ‘Even after the people of India have reposed power in him, his need to constantly play up a sense of personal and national victimhood, his need to perpetually play into stereotypes about minorities, has grown rather than diminished with his time in office. Paranoia is replacing confidence’ (Mehta 2017). Here victimization of the majority becomes a common populist tactic that is being performed with the purpose of legitimizing ‘authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of “the people”’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 18; see also Suzuki, this special issue).

In ontological security terms, such tactics can also be interpreted in line with Chernobrov’s (2017) discussion of how public reactions to crises may stimulate narcissistic populist narratives aiming to construct an idea of a secure ‘self’—an imagined container of ontological security (see also Steele 2008). ‘The self is responding to the anxieties of self-examination, disruption of the continuous narrative, and the other’s foreign practice,’ which in the case of Modi’s speeches refers to Muslims and Pakistan. Narcissism, as Chernobrov emphasizes (in reference to Horney 1951, 21–23), is a “normal” defensive process that keeps the group together: it provides feelings of identity, validation, and superiority while compensating for inner divisions and self-alienation’ (Chernobrov 2017, 587). It becomes, he continues, the only way for a self-flattening category to survive, as any attempt at recognizing a collective identity necessarily flattens all inner complexity.

### **Narratives about gendered national identity**

This is also where gendered images of the Hindu nation come into play.<sup>12</sup> Dibyesh Anand (2011) has described Hindu nationalism and Hindutva as a *schizophrenic nationalism*; a nationalism that brings together a politics of

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of gendered narratives in populist discourse, see Steele’s discussion of homecoming videos; Homolar and Schulz references to gendered discourse in Trump’s speeches; and Zarakol and Gulsah Capan’s analysis of Erdogan (this special issue).

imagination, ontological insecurity, cultural transformation and social mobilization in ways that generate violence and fear while at the same time allowing the myth of tolerant Hindus to go unchallenged. Sikata Banerjee (2012) refers to Hindutva as *muscular nationalism*, emphasizing how ideas of manhood are animated not so much by an effeminate other as by a fear of a hypermasculine enemy which demands the recovery of a lost manhood in order to resist the erosion of Hindu political presence and dominance. A more aggressive and disciplined Hindu male is thus needed who is able to firmly deal with the danger posed by a religious other in an effort to make India a true Hindu nation. This is similar to my own conception of Hindutva as *anxious nationalism* (Kinnvall 2006), in which narratives of national identity merge with images of religious resurgence, gender and race to construct what Lacan (2000) has referred to as the *fantasmatic* (fictional) other in response to ontological insecurity as a sense of emasculation. Anxious nationalism has its roots in the inability to dwell in ambivalence (Cash 2016), and seeks to heal a sense of unease and distress by making certain categories of others into existential threats. Only by reinforcing a certitude about the imagination of a pure self and a polluted other can (an imagined) ontological security be constructed (Kinnvall 2006).

Anxious nationalism thus incites a type of security which aims to police, deter or surveil the unknown. 'Mechanisms of control, security or other governing practices channel these general senses of anxiety into particular threats, such as migration, radicalisation, war on terror, austerity and environment' (Eklundh et al 2017, 8). In India, this threat has consistently come from the imagined ills of Muslim society—at home and abroad—in which Muslims are painted with the same Islamophobic brush. As Anand (2011, 15) contends:

Hindutva plays a game of fear with many strands—Islam by its very nature is fundamentalist ... the history of Muslim rule in India is nothing but a catalogue of crimes of violence, plunder and rape of Hindus; Muslims are solely responsible for the partition of *Akhanda Bharat* (united India) and those Muslims who stayed back did so because they were not satisfied with a separate Pakistan but desired the Islamization of the whole of India.

As Svensson (2009) has argued, a ritualized disciplining of Muslims and their bodies is an intrinsic part of Hindutva as the subordination of Muslims is always present. By perceiving the icon of terrorism in terms of a Muslim man, the discourse on terror plays into the hands of Hindu nationalist forces, echoing their conceptions of Indian society and nationhood. By viewing terror as originating from the outside—where Muslims are conceived of as unpatriotic and as embodying a latent threat—it simultaneously immunizes Indians from blame '(a true Indian cannot be involved because then he or she is per definition not Indian; if an Indian is involved, it is a consequence of her/his having been indoctrinated and deluded)' (Svensson 2009, 30). Hence, placing Muslims at the margins or in an outside category of blame institutes boundaries relating to the essence and accepted conduct of what it means to be Indian. From an ontological security perspective, it is about naming, or knowing, the other. 'The illusion of knowing the other enables the self to act within its continuous narrative' (Chernobrov 2017, 584), thus reinforcing a linear conception of external enemies and threats.

This masculinist state is being promulgated not only upwards and outwards, but also downwards towards the most relegated groups in the Indian society, such as Dalit and Muslim women, as well as towards any critical proponents of Hindutva politics. As Kaul (2017, 6) has argued: 'The Modi tenure has been disastrous for minorities, environmentalists, labour rights activists, liberal media, progressive universities, socially and economically vulnerable groups such as Dalits (oppressed castes) and farmers, to name a few.' In terms of sexual violence, Dalit women have been repeatedly targeted whenever their communities challenge oppression and exploitation, and Brahminical–patriarchal ideas of the Hindu right have been intensified through recent liberal policies and violently enforced through rituals of patriotism (Kabir 2014). Modi having been in charge of the most business-friendly government India has ever experienced (although some would argue it hides an ugly reality of crony capitalism; see Kaul 2017), it is easy to see how the election of him and the BJP may actually embolden upper-caste and economically powerful conservatives. Populist politics thus merge physical and ontological insecurity, tying together the body politic of the nation with the physical and structural violence against vulnerable groups or those viewed as pathological enemies of the Hindu nation.<sup>13</sup>

The populist discourse of the Hindutva movement shows that it appeals not only to those who have lost out from a changing economic and political landscape, but also to those who are concerned about losing their (masculine) privileges. Since 1947, sexual violence against minority and lower-caste women has increasingly been used to consolidate cross-caste Hindu alliances, and in the Gujarat pogroms in 2002, led by the ruling Hindutva right, women were gang-raped and murdered. Gang rape has also been a powerful tactic of social control in a landscape where lower castes have mobilized against historic caste discrimination, and the Delhi gang rape of 2012<sup>14</sup> and other similar onslaughts also testify to the level of sexual violence in Indian cities (Desai 2016; Kinnvall 2017). Jeans and mobile phones have similarly been proclaimed to be the main cause of violence against women in an increasingly neoliberal India, resulting in a caste council recently banning girls under 18 from wearing or carrying these items (*Times of India* 2016).

Behind these assaults lies a historical Hindu nationalist narrative of the 'nation as mother as goddess', which has taken its physical shape in the cow and the female and has been used to reinforce the notion of the nation in bodily (essentialist) form. While the mother cow refers to family and nation alike, her protection refers to patriarchal authority and to the Hindu state; the rightful kingdom of Rama (*ram rajya*) (van der Veer 1996)—narrativized as an ontological security provider. It is within this logic of religious discourse that the protection of the cow and Hindu women become symbolic of a 'pure' Hindu nation-state in opposition to the fantasmatic other—the Muslims. This is where religious resurgence is most prominently expressed—both as an external threat

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<sup>13</sup> For the relationship between physical and ontological security, see also Steele's, Subotic's, Browning's, and Homolar and Schulz's articles in this special issue.

<sup>14</sup> The incident in Delhi refers to the gang rape of a 23-year-old medical student on 16 December 2012. Following the rape there was an emotional outburst calling for immediate public executions, withdrawal of lawyers from the accused, more restrictions on women's whereabouts and an intensification of far-right activity.

from neighboring Muslim-majority countries and as an internal threat from the *kattarwadi Mohammedan* (fanatic Muslim). However, the discourse of religious resurgence is also a gendered populist call to the Hindu community to remind contemporary Hindus that their property, women and survival are at stake in this violent war being waged by Muslims on innocent Hindus. It is, in other words, a call for an awakening of the Hindu mind, body and body politics where an awakened masculine nation is called to protect the feminine land (Anand 2011) in order to restore an imagined ontological security.

Here, gendered narratives of Muslim women as demographic bombs are in abundance and narrated as an even bigger threat than the 'Muslim terrorist'. The narrative focus is not only on over-reproductive Muslim women and hypersexualized Muslim men, but also on seductive plans by Muslim communities to 'allure, attract and abduct young Hindu girls for marriage to the Muslims' (quoted in Anand 2011, 50). The end result, some Hindu nationalists propose, is Hindus becoming a minority in their own country (Baccheta 2000; Kinnvall 2006). The 'love jihad' campaign is particularly illustrative of this phenomenon, as it refers to campaigns run by Hindu nationalists against what they say is a Muslim conspiracy to convert Hindu girls to Islam (*Times of India* 2014; Dixit 2014).

Dibyesh Anand (2011) has referred to such narratives as 'pornosexualism', to describe how images of 'lecherous' Muslims constitute a danger for 'innocent' Hindu women, but also how this encourages the mobilization of Hindu women for Hindutva in the name of self-defence and the protection of Hindu women and the Hindu nation. This Hindu state, or Hindu Rashtra, can thus be conceived of as a gendered space of protection in both spatial and temporal forms; an authentic space of ontological security that existed before the 'invasion' by the Muslims and before the colonization by the British (Kinnvall 2017). In foreign policy terms, this new India will not be pushed around globally. Instead it will restore Indian pride and bring order to the chaos of modern India (Burke 2014), thus reinforcing a linkage between masculinity and violence where Modi comes to represent both the male Hindu warrior and the saviour of Mother India (Wilson 2013).

Portrayed as the founder of a 'new India', as a man of progress, growth and anti-corruption market-oriented policies, Modi provides a cohesive populist narrative to a masculine state that is able to assert itself both globally and locally. His portrayal of himself as a 'common man' (Makwana 2015) from 'humble origins' (Mishra 2017) and his resentment of the Indian English-speaking elite is aimed to reassert Hindu pride in response to Western dominance and upper-class antipathies (Kinnvall and Svensson 2019). Similarly to other populist leaders, Modi needs to prove his extraordinariness—often in specific masculine terms: 'in populism, the leader does not simply represent "the people" but is actually seen as embodying "the people"' (Moffitt 2016, 64). The populist discourse surrounding Modi's election campaign thus focused significantly on his 'manly' leadership style, identified as efficient, dynamic, potent and able to overcome the 'effeminate' leadership style espoused by Manmohan Singh (his predecessor), in particular. Not only are previous leaders effeminate in Hindutva discourse, but they also show signs of 'impotence' by their inability to strike hard against external enemies (such as Pakistan and China) and against internal threats (such as 'Muslim terrorists'). This image of Modi

manliness, Shristava (2015) argues, has been no more evident than in BJP references to his '56-inch chest'—'able and willing to bear the harshest burdens in the service of Mother India' (Shristava 2015, 334). As described by the blogger Vrinda Gopinath (in Shristava (2015)),

Modi's Empire line is most flattering to himself—of opulent turbans adorned with pearls and feathers, rath chariots of gold and chrome, a machismo swagger with his self-proclaimed 'chappan chati' (56-inch chest); flashy showmanship and stage craft at public meetings; it's an intoxicating cocktail of hyper masculinity, virility and potency. Good Grief, Narendrabhai does sound like a Mughul Emperor of Modern India.

Anxious nationalism thus shares with schizophrenic and muscular nationalism a wish to integrate nationalism with constructed versions of Hindu religion in which stories of glorious pasts, loss of territory and struggles against oppressors have been fused to account for a lost empire. This precolonial melancholia serves as a reminder for generations to come that past injustices and traumas need to be overcome and dealt with. Such attempts to change public narratives in a desired direction are evident in the new management techniques of the current populist government concerned with redefining the masculinist state on the international arena and reconstituting a sense of ontological security. This state is believed to conform to and protect what is thought to be its feminine core—thus disregarding the multitude of internal voices not currently included in this master narrative.

### **Gendered narratives of resistance**

Religion and nationalism are in a particularly advantageous position to supply these populist cultural master narratives of ontological security. Women and other groups have, however, protested against negative representations of them as a group, forcing the state to recognize the existence of numerous sites of conflict outside the harmonious world portrayed in the media (see Desai 2016; Sunder Rajan 1993). This emphasis on sites of conflict acknowledges the possibility of a theoretical arena where such contestations can take place. As alluded to earlier, processes of globalization, modernity and neoliberal policies tend to break down previously hierarchical structures of domination. In many cases, such changes have led to religious and cultural traditions being both challenged and substantially altered over time—in part as a result of women's and minorities' resistance and agency.

One should be aware, however, of the danger of unforeseen alliances springing up between these groups and reactionary social forces as the previous 'private' is brought out into the public. In India, the fight of women against pornography has historically, for example, often been sympathetically viewed by the moral right; their demand for a ban on abortion following sex-determination tests is supported by right-to-lifers; and their call for a uniform civil code for the nation is endorsed by fundamentalist Hindu groups (against the Muslims' personal law) (Sunder Rajan 1993). Specific gendered issues can, in other words, be deflected on to other areas in official discourses and representations. Still there are increasing possibilities that hegemonic history writing is uncovered within this process as women and other groups question



representations, labels and stereotyped categorizations. This process can be understood as a disintegration of hegemonic tradition from within.

To become effective, however, it requires that historically vulnerable people and communities acquire the tools, knowledge and resources needed to exercise greater leverage within the group as well as within the greater community (see Shachar 2001; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2011). However, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a struggle for alternative narratives, norms and codes of behavior in which privileges of masculinity and power are confronted and exposed. It is about changing and resisting a sexualized and gendered political order through collective action. As Desai (2016, 83) has argued, in relation to the potential for gendered resistance:

To restore the relationship between the sexes 'to historical action' would involve, as an immediate objective, 'neutralizing the mechanisms of the neutralization of history', which externalize sexed bodies and the social and political order in which they are placed. This means undertaking a struggle for wholesale reform through collective action—in contrast both to the resignation encouraged by essentialist notions of difference, and to a resistance reduced to individual discursive acts. If the persistence of gendered violence is to be challenged, that path may be the best one to take.

Resistance to populist gendered narratives must thus be viewed in terms of bottom-up approaches allowing for the subjectification and re-appropriation of alternative narratives that can resist and subvert populist hegemonic dominance. In Spivak's (1999) terminology, it requires that we address and recognize the incompleteness involved in the imaginations of the nation-state as a subject determined by particular inscriptions of power; that we, in Žižek's words, open up the moment of the political to both the external antagonisms between competing political forces *and* to the internal split marking these forces (Žižek 1989). Only then can the authoritative populist practices be questioned from which this sovereign body is constantly reproduced—often in gendered, violent and dogmatic terms. The Indian case thus adds an important perspective to work on ontological (in)security as it points to the fractured and imaginary nature of any efforts to seek security. Despite Modi's and the Hindu nationalists' attempts to name and frame it in terms of imagined pasts and specific cults, ontological security is thus never anything we can have or possess. Instead it must be viewed as an (impossible) desire for closure, wholeness and what Lacan has termed *jouissance* (enjoyment), something that can never be fully attained. Viewing ontological security as always incomplete also allows for other imaginations, or other visionary pasts, presents and futures, within which alternative narratives can emerge.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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